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## Don't Leave Behind the People of Burma

By Peter Gabriel  
And Joseph Pitts

In a major 1999 policy address, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated that the core challenge for the United Nations Security Council and the U.N. as a whole in the next century was to "forge unity behind the principle that massive and systematic violations of human rights—wherever they may take place—should not be allowed to stand."

Given Mr. Annan's lofty rhetoric, the Security Council's indifference toward the serious, prolonged humanitarian crisis in eastern Burma is astonishing. Rather than "forging unity," the Security Council, many key countries around the world, and short-sighted aid agencies have all but turned a blind and indifferent eye to massive and systematic violations of human rights that represent a serious threat to regional security.

First, consider the facts. Over the past several years, hundreds of thousands of people from eastern Burma have been forced by soldiers of Burma's ruling military regime to flee their homes in fear. The regime's

**Kofi Annan should be  
reminded of the challenge he  
set for the United Nations.**

scorched-earth policy—destruction of entire villages along with food storage and production facilities, systematic rape, the use of men, women and children as landmine "sweepers," and forced labor—has turned Burma into a human-rights nightmare. At least two million live in neighboring countries, where only a few find safe refuge while most scratch out a living as illegal laborers. Even worse, however, is life for the 600,000 people who have remained in Burma as internally displaced people. Often eking out a living in the jungle, these people are almost entirely cut off from the outside world and humanitarian aid as the regime's soldiers hunt them down like animals.

Next, consider the history. The internally displaced people are largely from the Shan, Karen and Karenni ethnic groups. Even though their villages were in lands historically controlled by their peoples, the arbitrary drawing of boundaries during colonial times by the British left them trapped and vulnerable when the country was taken over by the military regime.

Finally, consider the international response. Mr. Annan has not voiced his public support for a Security Council resolution on Burma. The U.N. General Assembly has passed consecutive resolutions criticizing Burma's regime, which are completely ignored by the regime. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has passed similar resolutions, also ignored by the regime. The Secretary-General's special envoy to Burma, Razali Ismail, has also refused to publicly support a U.N. Security Council resolution on Burma. To sum up action taken by the U.N.: minimal.

To be fair, Mr. Annan and the Security Council aren't the only silent party. Individual governments and national aid agencies have refused to fund emergency assistance for internally displaced people out of fear of offending the Burmese regime's claims to sovereignty. Other governments continue to supply a major and destabilizing arms build-up by the regime that represents a serious threat to regional security.

Meanwhile, internally displaced people in Burma despair as the few voices that escape from Burma's jungles are ignored by decision-makers. One man recounted to Burma Issues, a group working with the human-rights organization, Witness: "They came and destroyed our rice paddies and properties, and in the rainy season they killed one of my nieces. They came to order us to work as porters, and if you don't want to do it, you have to run away and they destroy your things."

The Committee for Internally Displaced Karen Peoples recently added chilling evidence to the already-full body of proof: "[E]ntire populations of some villages were detained for days without food. Most were told they had one or two weeks to move to a relocation site before troops returned to burn their houses, but the soldiers invariably returned earlier than that, beat them for being slow and force-marched them out of the village."

We believe that Burma's internally displaced people represent just the kind of challenge to the Security Council that Secretary-General was referring to before the turn of the century, and strongly urge him to call for action.

It is within the Secretary-General's power to call for a Security Council resolution authorizing an arms or travel embargo on the Burmese regime's thuggish leaders. He should do so immediately, lest his thoughtful challenge be lost in the shuffle of history, along with 600,000 people in eastern Burma.

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